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# Exploring 'generations' and 'cultures' of worklessness in Contemporary Britain

## Introduction

The concepts of generations and cultures of worklessness has popular, political and international resonance. In politics, high profile figures such as the UK Government Minister Chris Grayling are on record as stating there are *'four generations of families where no-one has ever had a job'* (in MacDonald et al. 2013). Esther McVey, when the UK Minister of Employment, made reference to the widespread idea that there is a *'something for nothing culture'* among some of those claiming benefit (DWP 2013). The general notion, that there is a section of undeserving poor who should receive punishment or correction, is a central concept in neo-liberal politics (Wiggan 2012; Soss et al. 2011; Wacquant 2009; de Goede 1996). Ideas associated with generations and cultures of worklessness also regularly appear in the traditional UK print media and the international press. For example, in 2013 the Daily Mail<sup>1</sup> reported a tragic story about an individual who was convicted of burning down his house, which resulted in deaths. They reported his status as a benefit claimant and described living on welfare benefits as a 'lifestyle choice' for some.

These recent examples have been foreshadowed by long running debate. Ritchie et al. (2005) suggest discussion over ideas similar to the generations and cultures theses go back 120 years. Katz (2013) argues that themes of this type have defined debate in the U.S. for 200 years. Underclass theory provides a theoretical expression of the type of thinking present in the generations and cultures theses (Murray and Field 1990). A foremost precept of underclass theory is the idea that problems of illegitimacy and crime negatively define sections of society (i.e. the underclass). Central to underclass theory is the idea that generations have been socialised into worklessness and that there is a social strata who are defined by their welfare dependency.

## *Evidence of cultural intergenerational worklessness*

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that there are only 2% of households where no adult has ever worked (McInnes 2012). Gaffney (2010) estimated the prevalence of households with two generations of worklessness using a sample from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) at only 0.5% (estimate of 20,230<sup>2</sup>, of a possible total number of households of working age of 20,818,429). Eighty-nine per cent of these households were lone parent households. Macmillan (2011) also used the LFS to examine two generations of worklessness. She estimated there were 15,300 never worked households in the UK. Macmillan's (2011) findings suggest that most of these cases occur where the younger generation have only recently left education. Where there is long term, inter-generational worklessness within households, this may be due to practical and social-structural issues associated with lone parenting, caring, and illness (Gaffney 2010; Macmillan 2011).

In an analysis focusing on areas with concentrated high unemployment the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU 2004) reported that there was no evidence of different, or separate, values amongst those in these areas. MacDonald (2008) drew on data from several phases of primary research. He found that, not only are young people committed to the values of work, those whose parents had been

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2304804/Mick-Philpott-benefits-culture-David-Cameron-backs-George-Osborne-saying-arson-case-raises-questions-welfare-lifestyle-choice.html> <accessed 30/01/17>

<sup>2</sup> A proportion of just 0.00097 of the total number of households of working age in the UK

unemployed identified this as an additional motivating factor in their desire to find employment (MacDonald 2008). The Prince's Trust (2010) similarly found young people to be strongly committed to work. Shildrick et al. (2012) undertook research searching for families where generations had never worked. They were unable to identify such families. Crisp et al. (2009) gathered accounts from research participants in deprived neighbourhoods. They found that people agreed with the culture of worklessness thesis, in that they believed that there are those who have been socialised into worklessness. Although they did not personally know such families, they believed that generationally workless families existed.

Zwysen (2015) reported findings that seem to support the generations and cultures of worklessness theses. He found young people, whose fathers were out of work, are themselves more satisfied out of work than in work. Zwysen (2015) also reported that young people, whose fathers were out of work, are more likely to be out of work themselves (Schoon 2014; Mäder et al. 2015; see also, Héroult and Kalb 2016). The sample is taken from the one wave of UK panel data, unemployment measured at one time point. Oesch and Lipps (2012) study the subjective wellbeing of those out of work using German and Swiss panel data. Their results are contrary to the idea that unemployment becomes normative and that those out of work are more satisfied. They found worklessness to be negatively associated with wellbeing, and that this is consistent in areas of high unemployment and amongst those who have been out of work for longer durations.

Schoon (2014) focused on the relationship between parental worklessness and the not in employment, education or training (NEET) status of young people during the Great Recession, circa 2008. She concludes that there is no support for the cultures of worklessness thesis. A historical case study of a geographical area of high unemployment in the UK, by Fletcher (2007), also found no support for the idea that there is a culture of a lack of commitment to work. Héroult and Kalb (2016) reported an association between fathers and sons unemployment levels, for fathers who have been out of work for over 6 months (there was no meaningful association between fathers and daughters). Macmillan (2011) found only 1% of sons to 'never be working' across the period of observation. Finally, a German study by Mäder (2015) found the association between unemployment amongst fathers and sons to be non-causal and to be explained by the similar backgrounds of fathers and sons. This replicated findings reported by Ekhaugen, (2009) and Macmillan (2010).

## **Data and Methods**

The research here uses the British Household Panel Survey - BHPS (BHPS 2010). Eighteen annual waves of data were collected before the sample was incorporated into the larger UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society) (Taylor et al. 2001). When a child moves from a familial household they continue to be followed in the BHPS. Therefore unlike previous work this analysis is not restricted to the familial household (e.g. Gaffney 2010; Macmillan 2011). The analysis is presented as descriptive and tabulated outputs.

### *Analytical Sample*

The analytical sample in this study is all young people in the BHPS who, at 16 years old, matured into the main adult sample, between 1993 and 2003 (n=2,538). This is a 'rising 16' sample, who are children of panel members, and who are added to the main panel as members themselves. They are linked to information on whether they are in work or not at aged 21, using BHPS waves 1998 to 2008 (n=1349, excluding cases lost through attrition). This is matched to information on whether an individual's father had a job when the individual was aged 14 using BHPS waves 1991 to 2001, and

linked to whether their grandfather had a job when their father was aged 14 (complete case sample  $n=691$ ).

The analysis uses the completely linked sample of 691 to assess whether there are generations of worklessness. The larger sample of 1349, linked to information at age 21, is applied to assess evidence of cultures of worklessness. For clarity, the rising 16's are referred to as the 'adult-child' generation (generation 1), their fathers referred to as fathers (generation 2) and their paternal grandfathers as grandfathers (generation 3).

A summary of how the three generations of interest relate to the BHPS structure:

- i. We use information from the survey to measure rising 16s (adult child) economic activity and labour market participation, this is at age 21.
- ii. From earlier waves of the survey we have the same measures relating to the fathers of the adult child group. This includes their economic activity and labour market participation.
- iii. A retrospective question asked of BHPS panel members '*Thinking back to when you were 14, what job was your father doing at that time?*' This has been used to derive a variable on paternal employment that is generally available in the BHPS dataset. This is applied to provide information on whether the (paternal) grandfathers of the adult child group were working or not.

### *Variables*

Several variables are used in this paper (described in Table 1). This includes the highest level of academic qualification an individual has obtained. Respondents are asked whether they have been looking for work, or not, in the past four weeks, if they have not they are asked whether they would like a job. Variables capturing responses to these questions can be combined with a measure of current economic status and used to interpret whether a section of the sample have no interest in engaging with paid employment. The Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification Scale (CAMSIS) is applied to assess employment aspirations. CAMSIS is a measure of occupational structure based upon social interaction patterns (Prandy and Jones 2001). This has been produced using Standard Occupational Classification (SOC90) codes (Lambert and Prandy 2012). CAMSIS scores have a range from 1 (least advantaged) to 99 (most advantaged) with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 15 in the national population.

## **Results**

### *Are there generations of worklessness?*

Figure 1 depicts the overall proportion occupying either employed or unemployed status and indicates the proportion from the next generation who remain in the same status or switch status. We note that .91 of grandfathers (generation 3) were recorded as employed when the father (generation 2) was age 14, and .04 were recorded as unemployed. There is a relatively smaller proportion of adult-children (generation 1) recorded as either in employment or unemployed at 21, compared to their fathers and grandfathers, because high numbers are in education (.26) at this point. A proportion of .01 of the total fathers were unemployed who also had a father (the grandfather) who was unemployed. A proportion of .01, of the total, of adult-children, were similarly unemployed, who also had a father who was unemployed. A larger proportion of those whose fathers had been employed were unemployed. The figure graphically illustrates the very small level

of intergenerational unemployment (grandfather>father .01, father>adult-child .01). The majority were employed and had a father who was employed (grandfather>father .80, father>adult-child .54).

Only five fathers were recorded as unemployed who reported their fathers being out of work when they were 14. Of these five cases, three of the adult-child generation are in work at age 21 and the other two unemployed. Therefore the percentage of the sample to which the category of three generations of worklessness could apply is 0.3%.

#### *Do those out of work not wish to work?*

The vast majority of the adult-child (generation 1) sample who are out of work report they actively seek paid employment or would like to be employed. Of the adult child sample, selecting those categorized as unemployed, at age 21, from the adult-child sample, there are 131 cases. Those who have not looked for work in the last 4 weeks are asked if they would like a regular paid job (Table 1). The majority of this sub-sample had recently been looking for work, or were in education, or involved in family care. 16 say they would not like to work. Those who say they would not like to work are not asked why this is the case, however examination of their circumstance provides some context.

Twelve of the 16 who say they would not like to work are women and four men. Three of the men have *university entry level* qualifications the other has no recognised qualifications. Five of the women report having no academic qualifications, one has a degree and the others are qualified between *university entry level* and *lower school level*. One, of the 16, also responded that poor health limits their ability to participate in work. Five of the 16 are resident with their own children and another identifies as a carer of a non-resident person. In these cases it is unknown whether these circumstances directly impact employment status, because this information is not collected in the BHPS. Although, significant caring responsibilities or a limiting illness would ordinarily be considered legitimate reasons not to work in paid employment.

Those who are unemployed and have been looking for work in the previous four weeks are asked whether they are looking for a particular job, or any job. 58 say they are searching for a particular job, 43 would take any job. The type of occupation an individual would like is also asked. Evidence of low employment aspirations here could be indicative of an adjustment of expectations which, over time, if employment is not obtained, might become an acceptance of a situation and form the basis of a culture of worklessness. It might also be an outcome associated with prior socialisation into low expectations.

The young men and women in the BHPS, who are out of work, aspire to a range of occupations. The CAMSIS score associated with these occupations shows men and women aspire to jobs at around the average level for the population, see Table 2. This is apparent because CAMSIS is constructed to have a score of 50 for an average occupation, which is included in the confidence interval for the male and female sample. Several individuals aspire towards what would be thought of as advantaged occupations. Some women identify roles in advertising management, author or journalist and biological scientist or biochemist as the job they would like. The men also identify aiming towards various occupations including scientist, financial manager and chartered or certified accountant. These unemployed young people do not appear demoralized in terms of the occupations they aspire to.

The level of occupations those out of work say they would like to have seems reflective of levels of educational attainment, see Table 3. Most have some recognised academic qualification indicating

engagement with, rather than withdrawal from, processes leading to employment. A higher percentage of those adult-children (generation 1) who are out of work are likely to have a degree than those in work at age 21. Although 16% report having no academic qualifications.

This analysis is limited in a number of respects. It depends on measures of individual employment status at specific ages. This enables an assertion to be made regarding the question of whether there is intergenerational worklessness. It says nothing about spells of unemployment or levels of underemployment, which are also important policy issues and which are often conflated with the generations and cultures theses. We do not attempt to assess the causes of unemployment or to empirically assess the reasons why people believe, apparently despite all the evidence, that there are generations and cultures of worklessness. Another limit is the substantial amount of attrition in the sample (Lipps 2009). The main analytic sample, where information has been linked on individuals and with their fathers and grandfathers, is only 27% of the base line sample. Notwithstanding these limitations the general finding, that there is no support for the generations and cultures theses, does not contradict what has been found elsewhere on this issue (SEU 2004; Fletcher 2007; MacDonald 2008; Gaffney 2010; Prince's Trust 2010; Macmillan 2011; McInnes 2012; Shildrick et al. 2012).

### **Conclusions – generations and cultures of worklessness are improperly held beliefs**

The overall message is that large-scale nationally representative data provide no evidence of multiple generations of worklessness in contemporary Britain. We can conclude that there is no evidence of the intergenerational transmission of 'workshy' attitudes, and this questions the idea that children are socialised into worklessness.

We reported that the majority of young people who are not in work or education confirm they would like to work. Those who are not in work have also generally shown a commitment to education, with the majority gaining some form of academic qualification. Those out of work, who would like a job, have attainable employment aspirations. Only a small number who are unemployed say they would not like a job, a number of these young people are involved in caring or identify as ill. Together this evidence suggests that the majority of young people are not living a workless lifestyle.

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Table 1, descriptive percentages and frequencies of several variables



applied to the adult-child sample

		% (n)
Main activity at 21	Working	59 (796)
	Unemployed	10 (131)
	In Education	24 (325)
	Other	7 (97)
If not looked for work in last 4 weeks would you like a regular job?	Yes	5 (72)
	No	14 (184)*
	Inapplicable (most have looked or are in work or education)	81 (1090)
	Other	<1 (3)
Sex	Male	47 (628)
	Female	53 (721)
Educational Attainment <sup>3</sup>	College Degree Level	12 (162)
	Pre-College Degree Level	4 (58)
	University Entry Level Education	38 (512)
	Higher School Level Education	30 (399)
	Lower School Level education	9 (121)
	None of these	7 (97)
n=		1349

Source: BHPS, unweighted data

\*Only 16 cases in this category are unemployed, the rest are either in education, training, caring or ill

<sup>3</sup> The table gives generic labels to the education levels. They represent specific qualification levels particular to the UK education system. College Degree Level=Degree or higher degree, Pre-College Degree Level= Higher National Diploma (HND), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or teaching qualification, University Entry Level Education=A' level, Higher School Level Education=O' level, Lower School Level education=Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE)

**Figure 1**, this chart depicts the proportions either employed or unemployed of the grandfathers, fathers and adult-children in the sample, n=961. The white boxes show the proportion of the next generation who are either employed or unemployed by whether their father was either employed or unemployed. Source BHPS.

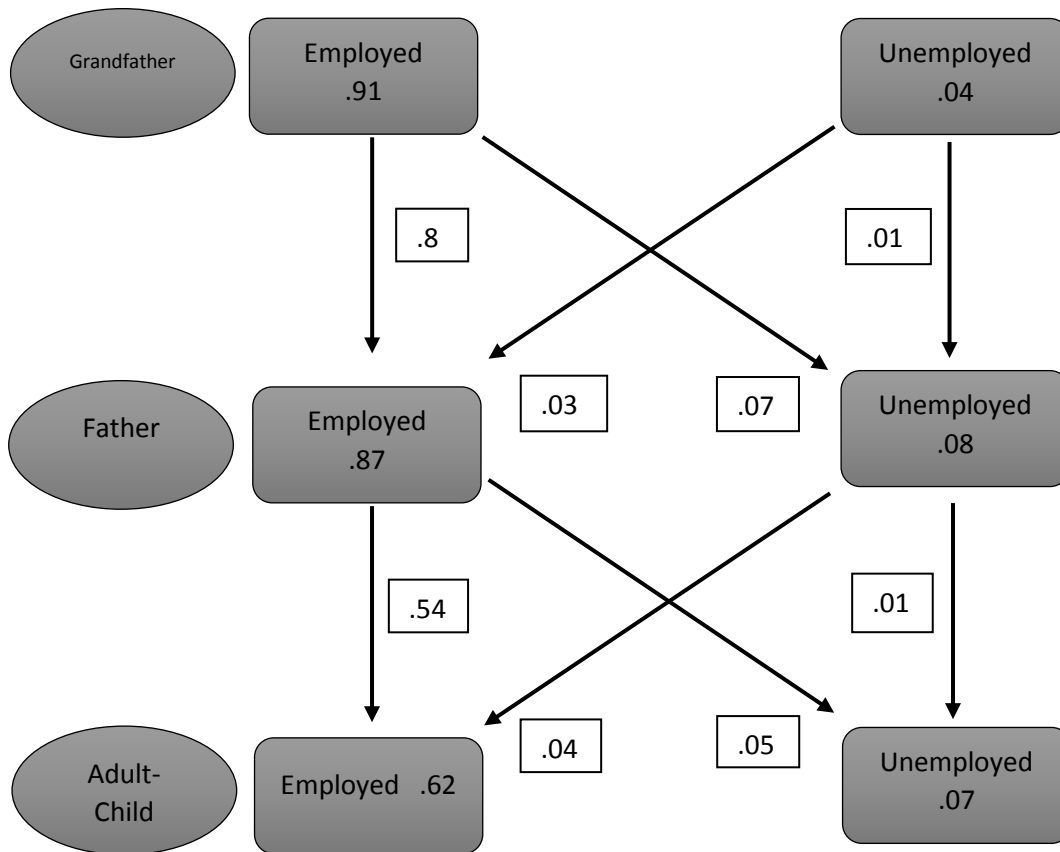


Table 2, mean CAMSIS score of the occupation of those adult children who are unemployed but identify an occupation they would like to work in, along with example occupations which score between 50 and 60 on CAMSIS

	Mean	Lower 95% Confidence Interval	Upper 95% Confidence Interval	n
Women CAMSIS	54	50	59	44
Men CAMSIS	53	49	57	49

Source: BHPS, unweighted

Table 3, highest level of academic qualification achieved of the adult-child (first) generation by whether an individual is in paid employment or not, a subsample of only those in employment or unemployed

	In paid employment %(n)	Unemployed %(n)
College Degree Level	13 (102)	22 (29)
Pre-College Degree Level	4 (29)	3 (4)
University Entry Level Education	31 (247)	18 (24)
Higher School Level Education	37 (297)	25 (33)
Lower School Level education	10 (79)	15 (20)
None of these	5 (42)	16 (21)
	100 (796)	99* (131)

\*sums to 99 because of rounding error

Source: BHPS, unweighted